

The New York Times

The Risk to Bristol Bay

Editorial

February 13, 2011

Last year, the Obama administration permanently banned oil drilling in Alaska's Bristol Bay, America's richest salmon fishery and the heart of a \$2.2 billion regional fishing industry. One huge threat to this extraordinary ecosystem remains: a proposed gold and copper operation known as the Pebble Mine. If built, it would affect a huge area of clear-running headwater streams and wetlands that feed the bay.

Responding to urgent requests from nine native tribes that depend on the headwaters for subsistence, the federal Environmental Protection Agency has now announced that it will assess the risks to the bay from mining and commercial projects in general.

This is very good news. The agency obviously cannot prejudge the study's outcome, but its announcement pointedly called attention to Bristol Bay's "extraordinary importance" as a salmon fishery and source of food and income for local residents. It also called attention to its obligation under the federal Clean Water Act to block any project that would have an "unacceptable adverse effect" on water quality and wildlife.

Anglo American, the London-based multinational powerhouse behind the project, says it can extract the minerals safely. But historically the mining industry has done a sloppy job of protecting the environment. Mining residues, like sulfide-laced rock, are toxic. No matter how hard the company tries to sequester them — it proposes to build a 740-foot-high dam to contain the waste — an earthquake or other disturbance can jar them loose.

The people of Alaska came close to blocking the project themselves in a 2008 referendum. Three former governors, including two Republicans, and Senator Ted Stevens spoke out against the mine. Industry, however, spent \$12 million on advertising about the mine's economic benefits; that, plus a last-minute pro-mining push by Gov. Sarah Palin and her administration, turned the tide in industry's favor.

The E.P.A. is right to do this study. We are certain it will find that the mine presents unacceptable risks and should not be allowed to proceed.

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The companies insist that the project would adhere to the standards of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Opponents of the project fear that, over time, the gold and copper tailings will seep into the Bristol Bay watershed, causing reactive copper sediment and other toxins to harm spawning salmon and other animals in the bay.

Kologanek village council member Anuska Wysoki is among those who fervently oppose the project. Year after year she has returned with her two daughters and husband to the remote, wind-swept Nushagak Point beach. Working with her sleeves rolled up, she has a gentle, content smile as she bustles between pots of boiling fish stew and cuts up the rich, glistening red sockeye meat to prepare for salting. Her family is part of generations of native Yupik subsistence and commercial fishing communities that have survived on the salmon run for millennia.

Wysoki believes the Pebble Mine would forever alter the way of life of her people. "Toxic waste will contaminate the fish and they won't come again," she said.

Not only the fish, but also the fate of indigenous Alaskans who depend on them hangs in the balance, she said. Should the salmon run be affected, "everyone will be forced to move to the cities," Wysoki said. "Right now we don't have to because we have salmon."

Nushagak Point fisherman Tom Rollman, Sr. has fished in Bristol Bay for the past 27 years. Asked about the Pebble Mine, he said, "It would be nice if we could do both." But, he added, "any time you tamper with freshwater, salmon do not survive." Rollman reflects the opinion of many in the commercial Bristol Bay fishing community when he says, "I don't think we can take a chance on the greatest salmon resource in the world."

Job Creator or Loser?

Louis Finch has been fishing in Bristol Bay for 20 years. He maintains that, should the Pebble Mine companies keep their promise of hiring locally, it could be a desperately needed boon for communities. Commercial fishing drives the local economy, and Finch isn't the only one who says they would welcome the opportunities presented by Pebble. Finch believes in the EPA's ability to protect the area from adverse environmental effects. "I don't want to see this fishery damaged more than anyone else," he said.

Pebble Mine promises 2,000 jobs for the first phase of the mining operation. That number would later drop to 1,000 long-term jobs over the 30-60 year lifespan of the mine. The companies also tout significant tax revenue for the state of Alaska.

Opponents of the project insist that, while jobs may be created, at least 12,000 jobs related to salmon fishing and processing would slowly be eliminated should the migration be affected. But for most in the tight-knit fishing community, it's about more than just jobs. It's a way of life that ties generations to each other, and to the watershed where they live.

Anglo American CEO Cynthia Carroll told a reporter several years ago that she would not go ahead with the project unless "the majority of the community" is in support of the mine. "I will not go where people don't want us. I just won't," she told Fast Company reporter Melanie Warren. "We've got enough on our plate without having communities against us."

It would seem that Carroll has a decision to make. According to a poll in June 2011 by the research group Craciun, Bristol Bay fishers are united against the project, with 86.2 percent opposing the mine. An earlier survey by Craciun found that 71 percent of the households in the Bristol Bay area opposed the mine, with only 9 percent even somewhat supportive of it; other polls have found the majority of Alaskans say the mine is not worth the risk.

Environmental groups such as the Renewable Resources Coalition are fighting the proposed mining development, and even prominent jewelry companies such as Tiffany's and Helzberg Diamonds have weighed in: They and several other leading jewelry retailers have already promised to boycott the Pebble Mine gold and copper products should the project be built.

Despite the opposition, Anglo American and the other Pebble Mine partners have continued to spend millions of dollars on permits and mineral exploration in the area, as well as an advertising campaign. But they face a new foe: on September 12, the Seattle Times reported that Democratic Senator Maria Cantwell, worried about the impact on salmon fishing in her state of Washington, announced that she would ask the head of the Environmental Protection Agency to consider using the Clean Water Act to stop the proposed Pebble Mine project. (She'll be dueling with Republican Representative Don Young of Alaska, who has already introduced a bill to take away the EPA's authority over the project.)

On September 26, according to Bloomberg Businessweek, Alaska Superior Court Judge Eric Aarseth declared that evidence presented by plaintiffs in the latest lawsuit against Pebble—relating to recent fuel spills and exploratory operations—shows there has not been a significant environmental impact on the area.

Meanwhile, the sockeye salmon run over, fishermen continue to come back in the wee hours of the morning with boatloads of pink and silver salmon. It was this bounty that Anuska Wysoki had in mind last summer as she looked out across the glimmering Bristol Bay, and summed up the struggle: "You can't eat gold."

Washington senator asks EPA to Protect Bristol Bay

Mary Pemberton, Associated Press

September 12, 2011

Washington Sen. Maria Cantwell said Monday she would oppose a proposed huge copper and gold mine near Alaska's Bristol Bay if studies find it would harm salmon and thus put jobs in her own state at risk.

In a letter sent to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, Cantwell described Bristol Bay's salmon population as an economic lynchpin for commercial fishermen both in Alaska and Washington.

Nearly 1,000 Washington residents hold Bristol Bay commercial fishing licenses, she said.

"Thousands of my constituents have contacted me expressing their concerns regarding the potentially catastrophic and widespread long-term impacts of the proposed Pebble Mine, which would be the world's largest man-made excavation," Cantwell said in her letter.

Cantwell called on the Environmental Protection Agency to consider using the Clean Water Act to prohibit or restrict large-scale development around the bay if it would harm the world-class salmon-producing rivers in the region.

She also expressed her support of the agency's decision to conduct a thorough analysis of large-scale mining near the Pebble Mine project site.

In addition to commercial fishing jobs, nearly all major seafood operations that process Bristol Bay fish are based in Washington. Cantwell's letter said Bristol Bay commercial and recreational fisheries are worth at least \$500 million annually.

The EPA announced in February that it would analyze the potential impact of the Pebble mine proposal on watersheds feeding Bristol Bay.

The Bristol Bay Native Corp. and nine federally recognized Bristol Bay Alaska native tribes have asked the EPA to use its authority under the Clean Water Act to stop the mine from being developed. The analysis is expected to be released this fall.

Canada-based Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd. and Anglo American plc in the United Kingdom have a 50-50 partnership in the Pebble project. Mike Heatwole, a spokesman for Pebble Partnership, which represents the two companies, was not immediately available for comment.

The companies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars scoping out the deposit, which Northern Dynasty describes as the largest undeveloped deposit of its type in the world with the potential of producing 53 billion pounds of copper, 50 million ounces of gold and 2.8 billion pounds of molybdenum over nearly 80 years.

The head of Bristol Bay Native Corp. which has over 9,000 shareholders, welcomed Cantwell's move. Jason Metrokin said in a statement that Pebble presents an "unacceptable risk to Bristol Bay salmon, which have supported our communities for thousands of years" while providing an important commercial, food and cultural resource.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, the ranking member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said Cantwell, also a member of the panel, is attempting to pre-judge development in Bristol Bay in what amounts to a

serious violation of Alaska's state's rights that would undermine the established environmental review process that requires dozens of permits.

"A pre-emptive veto makes no more sense than a pre-emptive approval," Murkowski said in a statement.



Concerns raised about Pebble mine study process

Becky Bohrer, AP
February 24, 2012

JUNEAU (AP) — The group behind a massive copper and gold prospect near a world premier salmon fishery has released what has been billed as "one of the most exhaustive environmental study programs in the history of U.S. mineral development."

The Pebble Limited Partnership, in some 27,000 pages of data and analysis, purports to provide an in-depth look at the environmental and social conditions in southwest Alaska's Bristol Bay region. Pebble Vice President for Environment Ken Taylor said the data, as well as ongoing studies, are critical for monitoring and ensuring that the Pebble Mine project does not alter the pristine environment.

The work has been dismissed by some environmentalists, fishermen and others as bought-and-paid-for science that should be viewed as tilted in favor of development. Taylor said this is a standard response from opponents and is "ridiculous." He said some consultants who helped Pebble also do work for federal agencies and that they're credible, objective scientists.

But this isn't the first time concerns have been raised about Pebble's study process.

Correspondence between state and federal agencies, obtained through a public records request by Trout Unlimited and provided to The Associated Press, shows frustration and sometimes doubt about the working groups Pebble established to provide expertise as the project moves toward the permitting phase.

"The current process is beneficial to Pebble Partners. However, the process is not beneficial to the Agencies," according to minutes from what was called the fish technical working group in a Jan. 9, 2008 meeting. "Pebble Partners need to provide additional information for the process to be useful to the Agencies."

"This is getting to be a huge time sink for agencies and at this point it does not seem like a good use of our time," Phil Brna, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Biologist, wrote in an email to working group colleagues on Dec. 23, 2008.

"It's virtually impossible to provide substantive review comments when (Pebble) doesn't disclose more details of their development plans and their contractors only occasionally share snippets of the data they've collected," Ted Otis, of the Alaska Fish and Game Department, said in response to Brna's message.

The state Department of Natural Resources helped set up an interagency steering committee to guide the scope of and address concerns raised by the working groups. Working group meetings began in mid-2007, when some studies were already under way, and they continued until January 2010, when Pebble ended the effort.

There were warnings of possible defections just months into the effort. The Army Corps of Engineers announced it would no longer participate in the working groups in January 2009, citing lack of information.

In an interview, Brna said the agencies felt like Pebble was not really answering their questions. He said the agencies were never even able to sort out with Pebble the questions that should be addressed.

"It's one thing to have sufficient information for permitting. It's another thing to have sufficient information to study the effects of a mine over time, over the life of the mine," he said. "And we felt we needed to do both of those."

"I'm sure some of the stuff for ground water, there's probably not any better ground water data anywhere, or some of the surface water stuff, or the chemical constituents in the water or the rock, all that stuff is probably pretty amazing," Brna said. "But when it comes to some of the fish stuff, I think that's when the agencies have more concern."

Kate Harper, with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, said each agency has its priorities, and people with different expertise have certain things they'd like to see. She said Fish and Game must decide what it believes is necessary for Pebble to address.

The Pebble project has been the subject of a heated PR battle for years. Supporters say it would bring much-needed jobs to economically-depressed rural Alaska but opponents fear it could fundamentally change the landscape and disrupt if not destroy a way of life. Some of Pebble's own ads simply urge a "factual" conversation about the project.

The mine is a joint venture of Canada-based Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd. and Anglo American plc of the United Kingdom.

The companies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars scoping the deposit, which Pebble, on its website, calls one of the large deposits of its kind in the world with the potential of producing 80.6 billion pounds of copper, 107.4 million ounces of gold and 5.6 billion pounds of molybdenum over decades.

Taylor called the deposit "a strategic national resource," saying the U.S. imports about 40 percent of its copper. The mine would be above Iliamna Lake, the largest producer of sockeye salmon in the world. Taylor said he'd be "gone in a heartbeat" if anything came up showing the project couldn't be developed in an environmentally responsible way.

Taylor, who was hired in 2008, said he thinks the biggest frustration among working group members was the lack of a project description, include details on where infrastructure like a mill or tailing facility would be.

"They were ready to say, 'OK, let's see what you're going to do, and we'll see if you have the right information or if you're studies are focused on the right things.' It was very difficult for them to meet month after month, year after year, without having anything in front of them," he said in an interview.

Without that information, he said, it was "hard for them to figure out" what the impacts would be and what needed to be mitigated.

Taylor said it's possible the project could advance to the permitting phase as early as this year, and a full project description would surely come then.

Doug Limpinsel, a biologist with NOAA Fisheries who was involved in the working group process, said one of his biggest unanswered questions is: How many fish are going to be removed?

Limpinsel said it would be a great gesture if Pebble, which spent a reported \$150 million compiling the report, spent

another \$100 million building off that with agency input.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is also conducting a baseline watershed assessment, a draft of which it plans to release in late April. Agencies also will again review Pebble's studies to determine if they're sufficient once it applies for permits.

"With Pebble, everybody can be confident there will be a pretty rigorous review of that information," said Tom Crafford, the director of project management and permitting for the state Department of Natural Resources.

Lindsey Bloom, a program manager with Trout Unlimited, said the state has never rejected a large mining project, and it will be relying on Pebble's own studies, going back to the company if it needs more information. Bloom and others say one has to question whether Pebble's work can be trusted.

Said Taylor, "We're not encouraging people to support us at this point. There's nothing to support. Wait until there's a project out, and let it go through the process."

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Mr. President: Keep Wild Salmon on Our Plates!

Chris Wood, President and CEO, Trout Unlimited

February 16, 2012

It is not often that a fish can define your life's work. Rarer still can the most powerful man on earth, the President of the United States, determine the future of that fish. President Obama must decide before his re-election campaign is over whether nearly one-third of the wild salmon consumed in the United States can continue to provide an important source of delicious and healthy protein for millions of Americans (try, for example, Grilled Salmon with Ancho Honey Porter Glaze). Or, whether an ill-conceived, open pit mine in the headwaters of Bristol Bay, Alaska, is more important

It all started for me more than 20 years ago in Alaska. I watched hundreds of deformed, hook-jawed, flesh-sloughing salmon roil along the banks of a river that I'd planned on fishing. No way was I going to allow what had contaminated the fish get on my sweet new rubber Ranger waders. So, I left, and went to the nearest library. Remember those places with books, before Wikipedia?

I learned salmon are born in freshwater streams, migrate to the ocean for several years and then return to their birth stream. How they can travel hundreds of miles on their journey home, gaining thousands of feet of elevation, subsisting only off the fat they have stored. They go through the physical transformation described above and have sex one time. One time, then die.

What started as a humbling educational experience blossomed into a career that's allowed me to help conserve the landscapes that we love to fish and hunt, while also providing food for my family. All of that, and more, is at risk in Bristol Bay. In this remote corner of southwest Alaska, more than 40 million salmon return to spawn every year. The future of this place, an area the size of Ohio where a visitor is more likely to see a caribou or bear than another person, is in the hands of President Obama and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). That is why Trout Unlimited (TU) is working with Alaska native people, recreational and commercial fishermen, hunting and angling organizations, outdoor retailers, talented chefs, jewelers, and many others to protect what is the world's largest and most important salmon fishery.

Several mining companies have proposed building the world's largest open pit mine in Bristol Bay's headwater rivers. In addition to tons of copper, gold and molybdenum, the proposed Pebble Mine would produce 10 billion tons of toxic waste and store it behind a 700 foot high earthen dam. In this seismically active region, independent scientists question whether a dam could withstand an earthquake. Recall that Anchorage was devastated by a 9.2 magnitude quake in 1964.

Fearing the impacts to wild salmon, Alaska Natives asked the Obama Administration to use its authority under the Clean Water Act to protect Bristol Bay from the Pebble Mine. TU led 500 other hunting and angling organizations to support this action. In response, the EPA in February 2011 launched a science review to evaluate the potential impacts from industrial scale development to Bristol Bay's extraordinary fish and wildlife. Importantly, the people who live closest to the mine and whose lives, literally, depend on the salmon fishery, recently formally declared their opposition to the mine.

At first glance, the Obama Administration appears confronted with the classic jobs vs. the environment conundrum. The reality is that the Pebble Mine would create between 1000-2000 annual jobs while imperiling 12000 commercial and recreational fishery-related jobs in the \$600 million annual salmon fishery. And the mining jobs would disappear once the minerals are extracted. In contrast, the jobs supported by salmon will continue long past when the mine is shuttered

as long as we take care of the habitat. Do the math; in Bristol Bay, protecting the environment protects jobs.

This is the wrong mine in the wrong place, and President Obama should stop it before more time and resources are wasted. Bristol Bay demonstrates that some places should be left free of industrial development because their natural resource values, and the benefits they provide to people, outstrip short-term development values.

In our faltering economy, jobs are a critical issue and stopping the Pebble Mine gives President Obama the rare opportunity to protect the environment in the name of protecting jobs and economic development.

Please ask President Obama to keep wild salmon on our dinner plates, in our imagination, at the end of our lines, and in our wallets.



Nation's Commercial Fishermen Unite to Protect Bristol Bay Alaska

March 28, 2012

Today Commercial Fishermen for Bristol Bay announced that 77 commercial fishing groups from Alaska to Maine have sent a letter to the Obama Administration urging it to protect Bristol Bay, its epic salmon runs and the commercial fishing jobs that rely on them.

The groups include the Maine Lobstermen's Association, Gloucester Fishermen's Wives, Maryland Watermen's Association and Southern Shrimp Alliance. In all, they represent more than 16,000 commercial fishermen across the country.

"Today, commercial fishermen from across America stand shoulder to shoulder in support of the most valuable wild salmon fishery on earth, and the thousands of commercial fishing jobs threatened by development of the Pebble Mine," said Bob Waldrop, a leader of Commercial Fishermen for Bristol Bay.

In a letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, fishing leaders express support for the agency's scientific watershed assessment, which is investigating impacts of large-scale development on Bristol Bay's productive salmon streams and rivers. The groups urge the agency to use its authority under Section 404(c) of the Clean Water Act to block a required federal dredge-and-fill permit for the mine, if the bay's natural resources would be harmed or compromised by large-scale mining. The mine is expected to produce and store 10 billion tons of toxic waste behind earthen dams, upstream of the bay's salmon-spawning headwaters.

"This is the first time I can remember commercial fishermen from the entire country speaking so clearly in support of a regional fishery," said Sig Hansen, a Bering Sea crab fisherman and star of *The Deadliest Catch*. "It's clear that fishermen and consumers across the country value Bristol Bay salmon and will not let a mega mine jeopardize it."

The direct value of Bristol Bay's salmon averages \$350 million per year, and the commercial fishery is the economic engine of the region. Now 130 years old, the commercial fishery supports about 8,000 fishing jobs, and another 4,000 processing and industry positions.

Waldrop added: "Bristol Bay is a national issue. Our fishermen hail from 38 states where they spend their earnings, pay taxes and support local economies."

Los Angeles Times

Vote targeting Pebble Mine in Alaska is over, the battle isn't

Kim Murphy

October 19, 2011

The Pebble Mine battle, a fight over what could be the biggest open pit mine in North America, is far from over. A few hundred voters in the remote hills of western Alaska cast ballots this week -- in one of the most closely watched elections in the country -- to halt big mining projects that might poison fishing streams. That initiative was targeted squarely at the giant Pebble Mine.

The anti-mining measure won by less than 40 votes among 526 ballots counted Monday in the sparsely populated Lake and Peninsula Borough. That's where a mining conglomerate hopes to extract 7.5 billion metric tons of gold and copper near some of the headwaters of Bristol Bay, the nation's most important salmon fishery.

Theoretically, the vote means that 280 people in the villages around King Salmon, Alaska, who cast ballots in favor of the initiative can block extraction of an estimated \$300 billion worth of gold and copper and veto a project that is one of the Alaskan government's top priorities.

But the issue is quickly going back to court, where a judge in Anchorage will hear arguments Nov. 7 on the legality of the ballot measure.

"What you're going to see is they all probably spent \$600,000 or \$700,000 to try to influence what ends up being about 520 people who voted in the election," Lamar Cotten, manager of the Lake and Peninsula Borough, population about 1,700, said in an interview.

"But it's really a big state issue. Are we going to allow our cities and boroughs to have power to reach in and control what goes on on state land? That's obviously the big question not just for this borough, but for the whole state," he said.

The Pebble Mine controversy has spread far outside Alaska. The site lies high in the watershed above Lake Iliamna and Bristol Bay, one of the last great refuges for wild salmon in the U.S. and home to one of the nation's biggest commercial fisheries.

The often-displayed photos of former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin going salmon fishing with her husband, Todd? Most were taken at Bristol Bay.

Developers dispute pollution claims

Pebble Limited Partnership, the joint venture that is proposing the mine, filed suit even before the election to block the initiative. The measure prohibits any mining project of 640 acres or more that would have a "significant adverse impact" on fisheries.

Pebble developers have said the mine wouldn't, in fact, pollute waterways. They cite a Superior Court judge's ruling last month that discounted concerns about acid rock drainage and purported problems with ground and surface water. The court concluded that years of exploratory operations so far have caused no significant environmental problems.

The bigger issue, according to developers and the state, which is joining the lawsuit, is to resolve who controls development of natural resources in a state whose revenues are heavily dependent on mining, oil and gas.

"The state of Alaska has stated that this ordinance is unenforceable as a matter of law and will not withstand the legal challenge that continues in Alaska's Superior court next month. We agree and will continue our legal challenge," Mike

Heatwole, Pebble Partnership vice president, said in a statement. He did not return phone calls seeking additional comment.

Superior Court Judge John Suddock cleared the initiative to proceed to a vote before considering whether the initiative is legally permissible, but will take the matter up again in his courtroom on Nov. 7. The conflict could well end up before the Alaska Supreme Court.

Opponents of the mine include environmental and fishing groups around the country who say they are trying to save a fishing resource more valuable than gold from a state that has laid out the welcome mat to corporate resource extraction.

The battle has already ranged far beyond Alaska. In Seattle, where much of the fishing fleet steams north to Bristol Bay for salmon, several well-known restaurants have hosted fundraising events for the Pebble fight; big jewelers such as Tiffany's and Ben Bridge have said they won't sell gold extracted from Pebble.

On the other hand, there has been some strong support for the mine project in western Alaska because of the large number of jobs and other economic benefits it would bring.

"This vote is hard evidence of strong opposition to the mine in the region. Even if it didn't win by a landslide, for those people to be willing to vote and fight for creating a brand new law, it just shows the borough that, listen, you're not listening to the majority of your own people," said Anders Gustafson, executive director of the Renewable Resources Coalition, the Anchorage-based group that backed the Save Our Salmon initiative.

Some votes thrown out

Gustafson said the initiative would have passed by an even greater margin had a canvassing panel from the borough assembly not thrown out about two dozen votes on grounds that they did not meet the residency requirement.

"Half of them were on my board of directors," Gustafson said. "They argued they were not residents. One of them was born there, had a fishing lodge there, as did his father before him; he's obviously been there his entire life. But people travel," he said.

Gustafson said all the rejected residency ballots known to him were cast by people who were registered to vote in state and national elections only in the Lake and Peninsula Borough.

"They would throw it out on the pretense of, 'Well, I drove by their place in December and I didn't see smoke coming out of the chimney.' They would do a Google search on a person. They said, 'This person bought a fishing license somewhere else,' and the assembly would throw out their vote. I was absolutely aghast. I mean, it was shocking."

Cotten said the election was conducted entirely by mail. The canvassing board, he said, was forced to make difficult decisions about ballots that came in from all over the country. "If you get your mail outside of your borough and you send it back from outside of the borough, we're going to look at it a little closer," he said.

"One couple [whose ballots were thrown out] lives in Arkansas. Another person has a dental office in California. One guy said, 'I moved out and I sold my home. I'd like to live there, but I can't find work.' Well, I've never heard such an argument. How far does this go?"

The borough, he added, has not taken a position on the initiative -- and is almost sure to end up in court over it no matter which way it turns out.

Salmon: Battle for Bristol Bay, a resource struggle for the ages

Gabriel Nelson, E&E Reporter

December 21, 2011

DILLINGHAM, Alaska -- On a chilly day in late September, fishing boats were docked by the dozens in this remote town on Bristol Bay. Come wintertime, many would rest on blocks in people's yards.

The boats sit waiting for the rush of the summertime, when Dillingham's population of 2,300 will double. Fishermen come from across the region to make their living, just like the settlers who flooded Alaska just over a century ago in search of gold and the salmon that earned the nickname "money fish."

The salmon catch still sustains these towns, but today they face a new test. Because of a plan to dig a massive copper, gold and molybdenum mine in the headwaters of Bristol Bay, people here are grappling with a question they would rather not ask: Can southwest Alaska make money from its wealth of minerals without doing harm to the money fish? Even as wild salmon populations have dwindled elsewhere, southwest Alaska's fishing industry has stayed strong since the first canneries were built in the late 19th century.

Year after year, fishermen harvest almost 70 percent of the salmon, but the ones that make it past the nets are still enough to replenish the population, said Rick Parkin, a 30-year veteran of U.S. EPA who has spent the past 10 months leading a study of the Bristol Bay watershed.

"I'd like to have my stock portfolio do that," Parkin said in a phone interview this fall from his Seattle office.

Fishermen and village leaders in southwest Alaska have asked EPA to study the risk posed by projects such as the planned Pebble mine, a joint venture of British mining giant Anglo American PLC and Vancouver, Canada-based Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd. The deposit's exact value is unknown, but with an estimated 80.6 billion pounds of copper, 5.6 billion pounds of molybdenum and 107.4 million ounces of gold, it would produce hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of minerals at current prices.

Whether the government should approve the mine is one of the most heated political debates in Alaska, a place usually known for its pro-development mindset. The project has raised tough questions that are being asked in many corners of the world, as people struggle to grow new industries and meet rising demand for resources without harming the richest ecosystems on Earth.

Salmon fishing boats set off from fishing towns like Dillingham for about five weeks per year, from the end of June until the last week of July, and cast their nets near the mouths of the Kvichak and Nushagak rivers. These are the two main portals to a vast expanse of lakes and streams that probably hold the world's most active spawning grounds. (Russia's Kamchatka region has some impressive runs too, salmon experts say, though the numbers that come out of Siberia aren't as reliable.)

From canning records dating back to 1893 and a meticulous fish-counting census that has taken place in southwestern Alaska every year since 1956, scientists know that an average of 33.3 million salmon start a spawning pilgrimage each year in Bristol Bay, on the north side of where the Alaska Peninsula juts into the Pacific Ocean.

A few Alaskan salmon stocks were exhausted by the early canneries, because people dammed the rivers and blocked salmon on their way to spawn. Not so with the mighty rivers that ended at Bristol Bay, which were too strong and wide to be barricaded.

"Of the plants at Bristol Bay and other northern points," federal fisheries inspector George Tingle reported to the U.S. Treasury in 1896 after a visit to Alaska, "it may be said that they require less inspection and surveillance than others, for the reason that the natural conditions are such that it is well-nigh impossible to exhaust the streams."

Bristol Bay now produces half the world's harvest of sockeye, a salmon variety with fatty, bright-red flesh that is prized by chefs and sport fishermen, and which comprises the biggest share of the region's \$300-million-a-year commercial fishing business.

Commercial fishermen catch other fish in Bristol Bay and farther out in the Bering Sea, but none are as valuable as sockeye.

Carol Ann Woody, a fisheries biologist who spent the past several years surveying the region's salmon populations for the Nature Conservancy, said the vast undeveloped expanses of southwest Alaska are the main reason the salmon have continued to thrive as wild salmon have dwindled elsewhere.

Across the United States, she said during an interview in Anchorage, about one-third of historic wild salmon stocks are extinct and 40 percent are endangered, mainly because of human interference with their habitat.

"It's happened in Europe, the East Coast, and now it's marching up the West Coast," said Woody, a veteran of the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Forest Service who now runs her own research and consulting firm. "Alaska has the last of the best."

Above the Pebble deposit, which is about 120 miles northeast of Bristol Bay and 200 miles southwest of Anchorage, is a salmon spawning stream known as Upper Talarik Creek. The creek winds its way about 20 miles to Lake Iliamna, the largest sockeye spawning site in the world, which can be seen in the saddle of two small mountains from the mine site.

There are no roads and no permanent structures in sight — just a vast, water-flecked plain, ringed by rolling mountains. The land is dotted with wild blueberry bushes and exploration drilling pads that are served by helicopter alone.

"If things don't work out, it'll be as if they were never there," promised Nance Larsen, a company spokeswoman, as she stood on a windy hill overlooking the drills.

But if things do work out, the hill will soon overlook an open pit perhaps 2 miles wide.

Like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a wilderness on the North Slope of Alaska that holds enough oil to meet perhaps 2 percent of Americans' demand, Bristol Bay is becoming a place that people argue about from halfway around the world. Locals are similarly conflicted, knowing that the Pebble project could decide the future of their region.

June Tracey, who runs a bed and breakfast in the nearby town of Nondalton, told Greenwire she is worried that the mine could harm the pristine land around her home. Though they are more than 100 miles from Bristol Bay, Nondalton and other towns near the mineral deposit are home to people who work for the fishing industry and catch the plentiful salmon for their own use.

The last thing Tracey wants to see is "a big old hole in our backyard," but younger people might see it differently, she said.

They have been raised with television, electricity and cellphones, not to mention the other technologies that have come to Bristol Bay along with what Tracey called "Western ways." She smiled at the phrase, perhaps because you can't go too far west from this corner of Alaska without leaving North America.

"I may not see it when they first break that ground there. I'm a mom, I'm a grandma and I'm a great-grandma," Tracey said. "But this is for the future of our younger generations."

The Pebble Partnership, a joint venture between Anglo American and Northern Dynasty Minerals, vows that it will do everything in its power to protect the environment.

Yet many commercial fishermen and locals who fish for sustenance are skeptical that the project can be done without a grave risk to the salmon. U.S. EPA has agreed to study that question, saying that officials will use Parkin's watershed assessment to decide whether to block a key permit for the project.

Pebble has enlisted 500 scientists, spent \$120 million on research of its own and is close to releasing a 25,000-page baseline environmental assessment with an eye toward applying for permits around the end of 2012. It is the largest research project ever done for a mining project, Pebble CEO and former Alaska Department of Natural Resources Commissioner John Shively said in October at a conference organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"If you look at the sensitivity of the project, if you look at where we are, it was absolutely required that we do this," Shively told the people gathered in the gymnasium of Dillingham's combined middle and high school, the home of the Wolverines. "This is something that we didn't do just to impress people."

Alaskans conflicted

It was early fall, and state accountants had just sent out the annual checks from the Alaska Permanent Fund, which gives every man, woman and child a share of the state's oil revenues. Retailers in Alaska's metropolis of Anchorage took to the airwaves to convince people to spend their \$1,174 windfall on an all-terrain vehicle, airline tickets or the down payment on a car.

As they waited for their share of the wealth, Alaskans could also flick on the television or the radio and hear the latest round of dueling advertisements on mining in Bristol Bay.

"One pebble," one recent television spot opposing the mine begins, as a stone falls slowly into a pool of water, "and 'boom.'" The familiar mushroom cloud of a nuclear blast fills the screen. "In Bristol Bay," the advertisement finishes, "why would we even contemplate such craziness?"

A similar advertisement about oil drilling in ANWR probably wouldn't get much traction. Most polls show the U.S. population is evenly split on drilling in the wildlife refuge, with Republicans mostly in favor and Democrats mostly opposed, but polls in Alaska show that support hovers around 80 percent.

Pebble has Alaskans much more divided.

It has been decades since a sitting governor, senator or congressman from Alaska has opposed drilling in ANWR, but over the past few years, the Pebble project has been opposed by prominent Alaska politicians such as the late Sen. Ted Stevens (R), former Gov. Tony Knowles (D) and former Gov. Jay Hammond (R). Current elected officials have generally treaded lightly on the issue or made it into an issue of states' rights, saying they want to let the project move through the permitting process so Alaska regulators can decide if the risks to the environment outweigh the value of extracting the minerals.

"Any effort by the [EPA] to block responsible development before a project has even been proposed would be unprecedented and would have a chilling effect on the state's economy," Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) said this summer ([Greenwire](#), July 21).

The man behind most of the anti-Pebble advertisements is Art Hackney, an Anchorage-based political consultant who had spent most of his career campaigning and making advertisements for Republicans. On his office walls, signed photographs show the smiling faces of Sen. Stevens, Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) and former President George W. Bush. During an interview, Hackney pointed to the photographs on his wall and insisted that Pebble is not a "greenie" issue. "You can be anti-Pebble and still be pro-development," he insisted.

His client this time is the billionaire Republican investor Bob Gillam, who has spent millions of dollars trying to block the mine. He has often mentioned his support for ANWR to show he is not against development of Alaska's resources. "Our position is 'ANWR, yes -- Pebble, no,'" Hackney said.

Another of the project's most vocal critics is Rick Halford, a former president of the Alaska State Senate who lives near the fishing hub of Dillingham. He is a classic establishment Republican -- in her autobiography, "Going Rogue," the 2008 Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin says it was Halford who first urged her to run for Alaska governor.

Halford is a pilot, and for years, he would fly near the site of the Pebble deposit to show off wildlife to his passengers. One of Alaska's largest caribou populations, known as the Mulchatna herd, has historically moved through the valley that contains the Pebble deposit. Halford would fly low over the snow-capped peaks nearby, which is where passengers could see caribou lying down in the snow to get away from the insects at lower altitudes.

He hadn't thought much about the project until Gov. Hammond's widow, Bella Hammond, asked him to look into the project.

Halford was always a staunch supporter of developing Alaska's rich resources, and he still thinks ANWR should not be closed to drilling, but he soon became convinced there is nothing Pebble can do to protect the fish in the Bristol Bay watershed.

"It's like the high school kid who says: 'We can do this, and you won't get pregnant,'" Halford said. "It's the lie of all of history -- that you can have both. That you can have it all."

These days, Halford has made fighting the mine into his life's work, though his wife wishes he would spend more time at home.

Halford could have retired to a career as a high-paid lobbyist after leaving the Alaska Senate, he said. Instead, he flies researchers around, landing on lakes near the site of the Pebble deposit so they can study the local ecosystem, and guesses what the mining company is planning to do by studying the layout of its exploration sites.

"My friends would say, 'You finally found a mine you don't like,'" Halford said into a headset as he flew his turbocharged floatplane through a series of banked turns to point out Pebble's network of drilling rigs. "Well, I guess I did."

The latest campaign

Gillam has allied himself with advocacy groups such as Trout Unlimited and Earthworks that have actively fought Pebble for years now. Those groups have lined up a star-studded roster of opponents that includes celebrity chefs and Hollywood icons, including the actor and environmental activist Robert Redford.

Alaska's wild fish have long been a potent symbol for environmental groups, said Mark Van Putten, a former president of the National Wildlife Federation who is now a consultant on conservation policy.

"Salmon is something a lot of people can relate to, because they eat it," Van Putten said. "People are a little more sophisticated about salmon than they are with some of the other fish species."

He remembers when the National Wildlife Federation worked to raise the profile of Copper River salmon among chefs, hoping to rally support for a campaign to protect that area of Alaska from development. In this case, he said, Pebble presents an obvious coalition of the sort that would be needed to block the project, because the mine could butt up against the commercial interests of anglers, commercial fishermen and subsistence fishermen.

Groups fighting the mine have also assembled jewelers -- including Zale Corp., Tiffany&Co. and Helzberg Diamonds -- that have promised not to buy gold that comes from Pebble.

"We have no doubt that they would do everything possible to develop that mine as responsibly as they possibly can. And I'm going to presume that the state of Alaska will do everything possible to make certain that happens if the mine goes forward," said Michael Kowalski, the CEO of Tiffany & Co., in an interview published this month on Natural Resources Defense Council's OnEarth blog. "That said, we have reached the conclusion ... that the risk is simply too great. Despite the best of intentions, the location of this mine is so inherently problematic that it is simply not worth the risk of a catastrophic event."

Pebble has spent millions of dollars on advertising buys of its own over the past several years, hoping to counter what it has described as misinformation about the project.

The company's project has drawn more attention beyond Alaska since EPA got involved, but it was already a cause célèbre several years ago, when Jason Brune, the executive director of a pro-mining advocacy group in Alaska, told the Anchorage Daily News that "people see Pebble as the next ANWR."

"ANWR was a polarizing project that was being used as a rallying point for the environmental community, and Pebble was similarly being used," said Brune, who is now a government relations manager at Anglo American, in a recent interview. "It was true then and even more so today."

Gillam bought an airplane for the most recent campaign, which was held in the Lake and Peninsula Borough that surrounds the mineral deposit. In the run-up to the election, the plane did nothing but fly from town to town. Campaign staffers would hop off in places such as Kokhanok, population 146, and walk door-to-door, registering voters and swaying them on Pebble.

The campaign cost Gillam several hundred thousand dollars. That would not be much for a statewide race, but consider this: In the previous borough election, 384 votes were cast. The initiative this fall passed, 280-246.

When all was said and done, the "Save Our Salmon" initiative and the competing "Defend Your Rights" campaign had received at least \$790,000 combined, disclosure records showed — \$1,500 for every vote cast.

By comparison, the 2008 U.S. presidential election, which cost a record \$1.8 billion and led to talk of runaway spending on political races, broke down to \$14 per voter.

In high demand

The oil beneath ANWR has been locked away since the Jimmy Carter administration, when the decision to create the wildlife refuge had people in Fairbanks burning the president in effigy.

Carter did some soul-searching not too long ago during a visit to the refuge he created. While in Alaska, the avid fisherman also visited Bristol Bay and caught grayling, arctic char and salmon. Most proudly, using a fly that he tied himself, Carter landed a 12-pound rainbow trout on the Copper River near where it drains into Iliamna Lake.

Reflecting on ANWR during a speech last January at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, W.Va., he quoted the Wilderness Society's former president, Olaus Murie, who spent decades campaigning for the creation of the refuge and famously described it as "a little portion of our planet left alone."

"I hope it can stay that way," Carter said.

That won't happen without a fight. With each new Congress, and each new administration since Ronald Reagan's, oil companies and Alaska lawmakers have tried again to allow for drilling on the refuge's coastal plain.

The calls for drilling in ANWR, which have so far been fended off by environmentalists and their Democratic allies in Congress, get louder every time gasoline prices rise.

There is no reason to think Bristol Bay will be any different. The developers have sometimes been heckled when they have come to fishing towns such as Dillingham, but the allure of the minerals in the ground is strong – and getting stronger.

Gold is trading at more than \$1,300 an ounce, mainly because it is seen as a safe investment at a time of economic turmoil, but also because the amount of new gold pulled from the ground has dropped by 10 percent over the last decade. Precious metals are becoming harder to find and more expensive to extract as miners go after the most profitable deposits.

Copper and molybdenum are starting to arouse that kind of attention because of their use in electronics and high-tech products favored by environmentalists, as the mine's supporters like to point out. Making an ordinary car takes about 50 pounds of copper, but battery-powered electric vehicles such as the Chevy Volt and the Nissan Leaf need about three times as much. It can take four tons of copper to build a one-megawatt solar panel or wind turbine.

"Our demand for the resources that come from these projects is not going away," said Anglo American's Brune. "We have a choice: Do we develop the resources here in Alaska, or do we develop them in other parts of the world that don't have the same environmental oversight? To me, it's obvious – you do it here."

Without large new sources of copper, prices will skyrocket, analysts at Vancouver-based Oren Inc. said this February in a typical memo to investors. That would eventually hit the average consumer in the pocketbook, making large deposits like Pebble too valuable to ignore, the company said.

"We fail to see how the small junior projects, which we do love, can produce enough supply to keep up with demand," the memo said. "We're through with the Lindsay Lohans; we're going to need Julia Roberts-style, expensive, ultra-deep mines. They're deposits everyone will want to drill."

Several of the mine's local critics said they are trying to remain hopeful about the years ahead, even if stopping Pebble today might only be buying them some time. Rick Delkittie Sr., a 55-year-old Nondalton native who has been a plaintiff in lawsuits to block the Pebble mine, said this fall's ballot initiative would do the trick, though it has been challenged in court.

"I think we're going to stop them," he said.

'Broader than just Pebble'

The deposit is only one of more than a half-dozen active mining claims in an 800-square-mile parcel of state land zoned for mining. By all indications, more riches are yet to be found.

Other mineral deposits are not as far along in the development process as Pebble, reflecting the huge cost of getting started in the remote wilderness of southwest Alaska. But the surrounding area could become a full-fledged mining district if the Pebble mine builds the needed infrastructure, said Jason Metrokin, the president of the influential Bristol Bay Native Corp.

Bringing the minerals from the Pebble deposit to market would require a power plant, a port facility and more than 100 miles of roads and pipelines, employing a staggering 2,000 workers in a borough of 8,000 people that would be the second-most sparsely populated county in the United States.

Because the Pebble deposit is on state land, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources is the main permitting authority, but the federal government also has control over a number of permits. Dennis McLerran, the administrator of EPA's Seattle-based Region 10 office, said in an interview that the agency won't decide whether to intervene until next summer at the earliest.

"Some of the other mining claims may be similar in scale. From our point of view, it is broader than just Pebble," McLerran said.

Metrokin's company, a congressionally chartered native corporation with annual revenue of \$1.7 billion, publicly came out against the Pebble project in 2009 after taking a neutral stance for years. Despite the chance of competing for lucrative contracts from Pebble, BBNC decided that the project's size, type and location are particularly ill-suited to coexist with the region's fishery, he said during an interview at the company's Anchorage headquarters.

BBNC got out of the fish-processing business years ago. The company now focuses on construction and fuel services. But many of its shareholders are commercial fishermen; a survey released this fall showed that 81 percent of them oppose Pebble. On the floor of his building's lobby was the company logo: a salmon.

Leaks and accidents are almost inevitable with a project so large, Metrokin said, and "if there were to be a failure or a spill, what could that do to the demand for Bristol Bay salmon?"

Groups closer to the fishing industry have also turned their backs on Pebble.

The Pacific Seafood Processors Association (PSPA), a trade group with offices in Seattle, Juneau, Alaska, and McLean, Va., came out last month against the project, changing course from the group's previous stance that Pebble should be allowed to work toward its permits. PSPA had never before taken a stand against a specific development project, and "doing so now is not a decision our association takes lightly," the group wrote.

Offshore drilling also poses a risk. President Obama decided last year under pressure from fishermen and conservationists to leave Bristol Bay out of a federal offshore drilling plan that runs through 2017. In what was seen as a compromise, he allowed oil companies such as Royal Dutch Shell PLC and ConocoPhillips Corp. to drill in the Arctic Ocean, off Alaska's North Slope.

Pebble would need dozens of permits to start construction, including a dredge-and-fill permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to comply with the Clean Water Act. If it so chooses, EPA could veto the permit.

The company's supporters say a single mine, no matter how large, could not possibly devastate a fishery relying on a watershed that stretches across an area the size of Maryland and New Jersey combined. But experts say salmon are highly dependent on genetic diversity for survival and would suffer from the loss of even a few spawning populations. "The emerging understanding of biodiversity has really undercut our confidence that we can have our copper and molybdenum and eat our salmon, too," Van Putten said.

Debate moves to Capitol Hill

EPA scientists studying Bristol Bay are mainly based in Seattle, but their work has unleashed a wave of lobbying on Capitol Hill and turned Pebble into the subject of a national political debate.

Earlier this year, Anglo American CEO Cynthia Carroll met with EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, who was also booked to speak about her agency's study at an anti-Pebble reception hosted by Sandra Day O'Connor, the former Supreme Court justice. That same week, dozens of chefs gathered at an upscale Washington, D.C., restaurant to serve Alaskan salmon and decry the mining project.

Shively, the CEO of the Pebble Partnership, was in Washington, D.C., at the same time. One of his stops was at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, where he gave a speech that was provocatively titled: "United States of America: A Second-World Country?"

He argued that the United States is being sapped of its economic vitality because it has become so difficult to extract resources. The Red Dog mine in remote northwest Alaska, which is responsible for 80 percent of U.S. zinc production and 5 percent of the world's supply, has a water pollution permit that requires water pumped into nearby streams to be cleaner than mineral water, which naturally contains trace amounts of metals and salts, Shively said.

At that point, he picked up a trash can, and into it, he poured a full bottle of imported Perrier water that was waiting for him at the podium. It was a prop he had used before during speeches in Alaska.

"The reason I'm doing this job is because I think if we can do it well, we'll change people's lives, and we'll change it for the better," Shively told the audience. "I don't want to do a project that kills all the fish and changes our lives for the worse. That's not my goal."

His speech resonated with Joe Reddan, a legislative affairs specialist at the U.S. Forest Service, who mourned the way Americans today think about natural resources. "I think we've met the enemy, and it is us," he told Shively during the event, paraphrasing the comic strip "Pogo."

That line was made famous by "Pogo" cartoonist Walt Kelly on a poster promoting the first Earth Day in 1970. It bore an image of the strip's main character standing in a swamp filled with trash, turning his face to the viewer with a look of despair.

Kelly meant people were consuming with reckless abandon and in the process had started taking the environment for granted. Reddan, a veteran forest ranger with an agency pin on his lapel, meant that the pendulum has swung too far the opposite way.

"Now, people think wood comes from Home Depot, and water comes from the faucet," Reddan said.

The Cordova Times

Prince William Sound's oldest newspaper, established in 1914

Pacific Seafood Processors now opposed to Pebble Mine

Cordova Times

December 3, 2011

Four years after issuing a position paper generally supportive of allowing the proposed Pebble mine to proceed up through permit application processes, the Pacific Seafood Processors Association has taken a stand against the mine.

A new position paper issued in November notes that since issuing its initial statement, PSPA has carefully followed the progress of the Pebble project, and considered available information about that and other large mine projects. In particular, PSPA looked at geographical, geological, ecological, hydrological, socio-economic and cultural attributes of the Bristol Bay region, the industry trade association said.

"Regretfully, we have concluded that the level of risk posed by the Pebble mine is simply too high," said PSPA, which has offices in Juneau, Seattle and McLean, VA.

Its membership includes processors and other entities doing business in Cordova.

"While we acknowledge the potential short-term economic benefits of this enormous project, we can see no way that it can be developed, operated, and concluded without—at some point—causing irreparable harm to the watersheds, ecosystems, fishery resources, businesses, people and communities of the region."

"Furthermore, we know from past experience, that actual or perceived damage to the purity of the waters or fish of the Bristol Bay region would harm the marketability of Alaska salmon and other seafood species, even from other regions of the state."

Since PSPA was organized in 1914, the association has never taken a position in opposition to any specific development project or category of projects of other natural resource industries.

"Doing so now is not a decision our association takes lightly," PSPA said in a statement. "While, after careful consideration, we are compelled to oppose development of the Pebble mine project due to its unique location, size, and potential harm, we look forward to continuing to work cooperatively with all Alaska industries on matters of mutual interest and to support projects that can ensure no negative impact on fishery resources or the marketability of Alaska seafood."

Corporate members of PSPA include Alaska General Seafoods, Alyeska Seafoods, Golden Alaska Seafoods, North Pacific Seafoods, Peter Pan Seafoods, Phoenix Processor Limited Partnership, Trident Seafoods, UniSea, Westward Seafoods and Yardarm Knot Fisheries.

PSPA also has several dozen associate members, ranging from marine suppliers, consultants and accounting firms to banks, insurance companies and transportation firms, including Samson Tug and Barge and Totem Ocean Trailer Express.

This story was first published by The Cordova Times and posted here with the newspaper's permission.

Poll: 81 percent of Bristol Bay shareholders oppose Pebble

Alex DeMarban

November 22, 2011

Opposition to Pebble Mine continues to grow among Alaska Native shareholders enrolled with Bristol Bay Native Corp., the company announced in a written statement Tuesdays.

The corporation has voted to oppose the Pebble Mine copper, gold and molybdenum prospect located in the Bristol Bay watershed, an important stance because the firm serves many of the region's residents.

Eighty-one percent of the shareholders surveyed now oppose the mine, a 12 percent increase from the last survey done four years ago, the company said.

As a regional Native corporation created by Congress in the early 1970s, a core Bristol Bay mission is economic development for its 9,000 shareholders and their descendents.

Only a tentative development plan exists for Pebble. The companies involved in the Pebble Partnership -- Anglo American of the United Kingdom and Northern Dynasty Minerals of Canada -- have not yet moved to the permitting stage.

But the Native corporation believes the risk of poisoning Bristol Bay's mighty sockeye salmon fishery outweighs the local jobs a large-scale development could create.

"BBNC supports responsible resource development, but opposes the Pebble project due to the risks it poses to our fisheries and our Native way of life," Jason Metrokin, Bristol Bay chief executive, said in a company press release. "We believe there are other projects that could be developed in our region that would provide jobs and other economic benefits that would not present unacceptable environmental risks to our people and our land."

Most shareholders surveyed support developing other resources within the Bristol Bay region, the release said. "These include renewable resources like tidal or wind (88 percent), tourism and wildlife viewing (86 percent), sale of rock, sand and gravel (80 percent), sport fishing and hunting (78 percent), and on-shore oil and gas (57 percent)," the company said.

Bristol Bay hired Dittman Research and Communications, which surveyed 2,286 shareholders over two months this fall. A separate poll of 802 Alaskan voters conducted by Strategies 360 Polling and Market Research found that 54 percent of respondents held negative opinions of the proposed mine. Thirty-two percent held positive opinions, the release said.

Food industry asks EPA to protect Bristol Bay seafood source

Russell Stigall

March 13, 2012

The agency representing 75 percent of U.S. retail food store sales has sided with the Environmental Protection Agency in its ongoing assessment of Bristol Bay waters.

Erik Lieberman, regulatory counsel for the Food Marketing Institute wrote a letter to EPA's Region 10 administrator encouraging the agency to complete its 404(c) report, scheduled to be released in April.

The letter was dated March 1 and can be found at bit.ly/OBB-FMI-letter. Earthworks released the letter in a press release Monday.

The letter was addressed to Dennis McLerran, administrator for EPA's Region 10 and signed by Lieberman.

"I am writing to express our support for the EPA's scientific assessment of the Bristol Bay watershed," Lieberman wrote, "and the impact large-scale development could have on this unique ecosystem."

Bristol Bay is a world-class fishery and an important piece of the supply chains of FMI's members. Lieberman said the Institute hopes the EPA's report will "reflect our own belief in the importance of continuing to preserve and responsibly manage this extraordinary natural resource."

The Food Marketing Institute represents 26,000 retail food stores.

The EPA's watershed assessment is part of its powers under section 404(c) of the Clean Water Act. The section deals with the disposal of mine waste into water bodies.

The Bristol Bay region has large deposits of low-grade sulfide-bearing ore. The proposed Pebble Mine is such a sulfide mine. Pebble is owned by the Pebble Limited Partnership. The Partnership has come out against EPA's 404(c) intervention.

The U.S. Department of Fish and Game forecasts 21 million sockeye salmon will be harvested from Bristol Bay in 2012.

Lieberman said FMI is working to support sustainable fisheries world-wide. This endeavor relies on fisheries being "maintained and protected."

"As an industry, we do not believe that sustainability and economic development are mutually exclusive," Lieberman wrote. "To the contrary, when approached correctly both goals can actually help promote responsible management. Bristol Bay is a one-of-a-kind fishery that is important not only to the ecology of the region but also to fulfilling the goal of long-term sustainable seafood sourcing."

The New York Times Magazine

Is There a Fish I can Eat Guilt-Free?

Paul Greenberg

September 30, 2011

Brand any fish "sustainable," and you risk making it so popular that it is fished to the point of depletion. A truly sustainable fish has to be not only abundant but also carefully managed to prevent overfishing. That's partly why the lean, delicious, ruby-fleshed sockeye salmon of Bristol Bay, Alaska, is the fish you can eat with the least amount of guilt. It's one of the largest remaining wild salmon populations left, and it's so strictly tended that more salmon often swim upriver — particularly between June and September — than fishermen know what to do with. In the lower 48, river-blocking dams and human pollution have reduced once-comparable salmon runs to less than a tenth of their former size. Harvesting Alaskan salmon is also inherently low-impact: nothing like sea-floor-destroying trawlers (to catch cod) or 40-mile, sea-turtle-ensnaring long lines (to catch swordfish) are used.

The most compelling reason to eat Bristol Bay salmon, however, is that buying it may help save it. The fish faces an existential threat in the form of Pebble Mine, a proposed copper-and-gold mine — potentially the continent's largest — that would sit at two of the bay's major headwaters and, according to David Chambers, a mining expert, add tons of toxic waste to the ecosystem. Mining promises a more lucrative economic future for the region: the 100-year value of the pebble deposit is estimated to be between \$100 billion and \$300 billion, compared with as much as \$30 billion for a century's worth of Bristol Bay salmon. As magnificent as those silvery 5- to 15-pound salmon appear and taste, the salmon-processing infrastructure is geared more toward tonnage than high-end restaurant portions. Most Bristol Bay sockeye end up in cans or as frozen fillets in supermarkets. They can sell for just pennies on the pound, wholesale. Half of the harvest is exported.

Higher American demand for Bristol Bay salmon could raise its profile and spur opposition to Pebble Mine, but supporting the fish isn't necessarily easy. Local processors don't really have a Bristol Bay brand yet. But because two-thirds to three-fourths of Alaska's sockeye comes from Bristol Bay, choosing that salmon species is one way to consume fish from the right place. And if you buy canned salmon, check the embossing. Cans from Bristol Bay's oldest producer are stamped with the number 35.



Massive Pebble gold/copper mine on the ropes?

Dorothy Kosich

October 19, 2011

RENO, NV - In 1974 famed boxer Muhammad Ali used the "rope a dope" strategy in his fight against George Foreman. It involved lying back on the ropes, shelling up and allowing your opponent to throw punches until they tire themselves out and then you exploit their defensive flaws and nail them.

The voters of Alaska's Lake and Peninsula Borough landed a serious blow this week to mighty mega-miner Anglo American and junior explorer Northern Dynasty and their massive Pebble Project.

Nevertheless, the Pebble Partnership could be utilizing its own version of "rope-a-dope" by exploiting the anti-Pebble Group's defensive flaws to nail them in the Alaska courts.

By a vote of 280 to 246, voters in the borough supported a ballot measure that, if upheld by the courts, would restrict future development that impacts more than one square mile of land within the 31,000 square-mile borough. The initiative changes borough law to prohibit the granting of permits for any big mine that would have a "significant adverse impact" on salmon streams.

However, the Pebble Limited Partnership and the State of Alaska may ultimately score a knockout in the Alaska court system as they challenge the ordinance in Alaska's Superior Court. On Nov. 7, 2011, the court will begin proceedings to consider the constitutionality of the ordinance.

The court has already upheld the validity of temporary, revocable land and water use permits for mineral exploration at the Pebble copper-gold-molybdenum project in the Bristol Bay region of southwest Alaska. Anchorage Superior Court Judge John Suddock allowed the borough ballot initiative to continue but said he would sort out legal issues when the case resumes on Nov. 7.

Anti-Pebble Project groups insisted the passage of the borough initiative "effectively halts the development of the proposed Pebble Mine which was expected to be the largest gold and fifth largest copper mine in the world and sits at the headwaters of Alaska's Bristol Bay."

"The Lake and Peninsula Borough residents have spoken loud and clear, they do not want the Pebble Mine developed in their community," said Art Hackney, spokesman for Alaskans for Bristol Bay. "In order to suppress the support Save Our Salmon [the initiative's name] has received, Anglo American and Northern Dynasty must directly contradict their earlier claims that they will only develop were they were wanted. They are not wanted in Bristol Bay."

Nevertheless, Ron Thiessen, Northern Dynasty Minerals CEO, declared, "Given the ballot measure's misleading language, in particular its seeming focus on protecting salmon, it's not surprising that it was support by a slim majority of Lake&Peninsula Borough voters."

"Certainly Northern Dynasty and the Pebble Partnership are wholly committed to preserving and even enhancing the fisheries resources of Southwest Alaska," Thiessen said. "Unfortunately, this initiative would also halt economic development throughout the Alaska & Peninsula Borough, and represents yet another misuse of Alaska's democratic

processes by paid opponents of the Pebble Project, whose goal is to stop the project before it receives comprehensive and objective review by federal and state regulators."

"What is most important is the rule of law in Alaska and the United States is clear and reliable, such that this unconstitutional attempt by narrow self-interests to restrict economic development in a region the size of South Carolina will not stand," he added. "We believe the State of Alaska's constitutional obligation to manage natural resources on its land for the benefit of all Alaskans will be ultimately acknowledged by the courts."

However, in an editorial Tuesday the Anchorage Daily News suggested that the borough vote won't be the last word in the Pebble Project. "The Pebble Partnership has a high bar to clear, and in the end the EPA's decision may well carry more weight than the borough vote. Either way, Alaska needs to get this one right."

The EPA is expected to make a preliminary report on its Bristol Bay watershed assessment before the end of the year. The agency is trying to determine whether a major hardrock mining operation and co-exist with some of the headwaters of the largest remaining wild salmon fishery on earth.

EPA announced in February of this year that it would conduct an assessment focused primarily on the Nushagak and Kvichak watersheds. EPA Regional Administrator Dennis McLerran said, "The Bristol Bay watershed is essential to the health, environment and economy of Alaska. Gathering data and getting public input now, before development occurs, just makes sense."

In a statement, Thiessen said, "The Pebble Project has the potential to create substantial economic and social benefits for the people of Southwest Alaska for decades to come, in a way that enhances commercial and subsistence fisheries and ensures the long-term sustainability of Alaska Native culture. Pebble simply has too much potential for the region and the state to allow special interests to forestall its development before an optimized mine plan is proposed for the consideration of federal and state regulators and the people of Alaska."

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